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## Enrico Morselli's *Psychology and "Spiritism"*: Psychiatry, psychology and psychical research in Italy in the decades around 1900



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### ABSTRACT

This paper traces Enrico Morselli's intellectual trajectory from the 1870s to the early 1900s. His interest in phenomena of physical mediumship is considered against the backdrop of the theoretical developments in Italian psychiatry and psychology. A leading positivist psychiatrist and a prolific academic, Morselli was actively involved in the making of Italian experimental psychology. Initially sceptical of psychical research and opposed to its association with the 'new psychology', Morselli subsequently conducted a study of the physical phenomena produced by the medium Eusapia Palladino. He concluded that her phenomena were genuine and represented them as the effects of an unknown bio-psychic force present in all human beings. By contextualizing Morselli's study of physical mediumship within contemporary theoretical and disciplinary discourse, this study elaborates shifts in the interpretations of 'supernormal' phenomena put forward by leading Italian psychiatrists and physiologists. It demonstrates that Morselli's interest in psychical research stems from his efforts to comprehend the determinants of complex psychological phenomena at a time when the dynamic theory of matter in physics, and the emergence of neo-vitalist theories influenced the theoretical debates in psychiatry, psychology and physiology.

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### 1. Introduction

In 1908, the psychiatrist and psychologist Enrico Agostino Morselli (1852–1929), a leading representative of Italian scientific positivism, authored *Psicologia e "Spiritismo": Impressioni e note critiche sui fenomeni medianici di Eusapia Paladino* (Psychology and "Spiritism": Impressions and critical notes on the mediumistic phenomena of Eusapia Paladino), a psychological study on phenomena of physical mediumship, based on his extensive observation of the medium Eusapia Palladino (1854–1918) in four series of séances held in Genoa in 1901–1902 and in 1906–1907.<sup>1</sup> In his work, Morselli put forth the hypothesis that phenomena of physical mediumship were the results of unknown bio-psychic forces

present in all human organisms, but able to manifest themselves only under particular conditions and predispositions.<sup>2</sup>

Morselli's study of physical mediumship and the status of psychical research in Italian psychology have received scant historiographical attention. In her compelling study on the history of the Italian psychology between the idealist and the Fascist era, Guarnieri mentions Morselli's involvement in psychical research in the context of her discussion of the psychiatrist and philosopher Francesco De Sarlo (1860–1929). Guarnieri emphasizes De Sarlo's broad vision of psychology as a discipline that included the investigation of phenomena such as telepathy, spiritism, and suggestion that were not amenable to the experimental method.<sup>3</sup> However, as her discussion does not focus on the emergence of psychical research in Italy, the theoretical and professional circumstances that informed Morselli's decision to engage in an extended study of

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<sup>1</sup> Morselli uses the spelling Paladino, however the spelling that appears on her birth certificate is Palladino, see [Alvarado \(2011, p. 80\)](#). For an intellectual biography of Morselli, see [Guarnieri \(1988\)](#).

<sup>2</sup> [Guarnieri \(1988, p. 555\)](#).

<sup>3</sup> [Guarnieri \(2004, pp. 21–22\)](#).

the physical mediumship remain unexplained. This is all the more interesting given the fact that for years Morselli was sceptical towards mediumistic phenomena and hostile to the inclusion of psychical research within the emerging field of psychology. Unlike his colleague Cesare Lombroso who became interested in telepathy and supernormal occurrences as a result of his studies of hypnotic phenomena, Morselli commenced his observation of mediumistic phenomena only at the beginning of the 1900s, nearly fifteen years after his study of hypnosis. In the same period, two prominent Italian physiologists, Luigi Luciani and Filippo Bottazzi, and the three young assistants of the physiologists Angelo Mosso developed a scientific interest in the physical phenomenology of the medium Eusapia Palladino.

Richard Noakes (2008) has argued that in order to understand why psychic phenomena came to be considered suitable topics of scientific research we have to deepen “our understanding of nineteenth and early twentieth century scientific cultures — their troubles as well as successes”. In a similar vein, Heather Wolfram (2012) has shown the relevance of the debates around the study of spiritism and psychical research for the understanding of late-nineteenth and early twentieth century psychological thought.<sup>4</sup> Following Noakes and Wolfram, this paper aims at retracing Morselli’s intellectual and professional trajectory in order to discuss his interest in mediumship in the context of theoretical orientations in Italian psychiatry and psychology around the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. The second section sets the stage for the discussion that follows, by presenting an overview of Morselli’s psychiatric training against the backdrop of the dominant materialistic, positivist and evolutionist orientations in medicine and psychiatry during the post-unitary decades in Italy. The third section discusses Morselli’s involvement in establishing experimental psychology in Italy and, in particular, his work on magnetic and hypnotic phenomena in the context of the Italian debate around hypnosis. Following James Braid and Hyppolite Bernheim, Morselli understood hypnosis as a natural psychophysiological process and excluded any connection between subconscious mental activity and alleged ‘marvellous’ manifestations. This section also focuses on the interpretations of hypnotic phenomena by Tamburini, Morselli, and Lombroso in the 1880s and how these interpretations influenced their stances towards mediumistic phenomena.<sup>5</sup> The following section deals with the shifting understanding of spiritistic phenomena among Italian scholars and intellectuals in the wake of wider changes in the cultural and scientific context of the 1890s. The latter part of this fourth section discusses Morselli’s critical reaction to the rising status of psychical research in psychology. Here the focus is on tensions and changes in his theoretical position. On the one hand, he defended the experimental method as the only legitimate way of ‘doing science’; on the other hand, he realized that physiopsychological research had reached an impasse because the materialist assumptions on which it was based did not allow to explain complex psychological phenomena.<sup>6</sup> The argument developed here is that these tensions, coupled with the influence of theoretical and experimental developments in physics led Morselli to adhere to energetic monism and envision psychical research as a research field that might contribute to the development of ‘normal’ psychology.

Finally, the last section deals with Morselli’s study of the mediumistic phenomena of Eusapia Palladino, his efforts to integrate his observations on mediumistic phenomena into his epistemology, and the transformative effect of this theoretical exercise

that ultimately induced him to adopt a position akin to that of neovitalist scientists who “stressed the need for making selected metaphysical notions a key part of scientific methodology”.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Italian psychiatry in the second half of the nineteenth century

Morselli studied medicine at the University of Modena in the early post-unitary period, at a time in which German materialism, positivism, and British evolutionism were increasingly influential in Italian medicine and psychiatry.<sup>8</sup> In his autobiography, he mentioned the Darwinian naturalist Giovanni Canestrini, the anatomist and anthropologist Paolo Gaddi and the reformist positivist psychiatrist Carlo Livi as academics with a marked influence on his intellectual development during his studies.<sup>9</sup> Morselli’s graduation thesis on blood transfusion mirrored the aspiration of post-unitary medicine to eliminate the remaining influences of older theories and practices, in particular, vitalist assumptions and their metaphysical implications in physiology.<sup>10</sup>

After his graduation, Morselli trained in psychiatry under Carlo Livi (1823–1877), at the San Lazzaro mental hospital in Reggio Emilia and in anthropology at the *Regio Istituto di Studi Superiori* (Royal Institute of Advanced Studies) in Florence under the evolutionist physiologist and anthropologist Paolo Mantegazza (1831–1910). Years later, he wrote that psychiatry attracted him for its connections with anthropology and for the fervent reformist spirit that characterized the discipline in those years.<sup>11</sup>

In the early 1870s, Carlo Livi, Andrea Verga (1811–1895) and Cesare Lombroso (1835–1909) were among those at the forefront of the positivist reform movement that had been advocating major changes in theoretical and practical approaches to mental illness since the late 1850s.<sup>12</sup> Lombroso, in particular, argued for a scientific analysis of the social problems that troubled the recently unified country in psychiatric and anthropological terms. He spelled out a direct relationship between crime and insanity and developed an evolutionist interpretation of criminality and deviance steeped in phrenology, “atavisms,” i.e. the resurfacing of primitive physical and moral characteristics in the criminal, the deviant and the insane.<sup>13</sup>

The name chosen for the psychiatric society, *Società Freniatrica Italiana* (Italian Phreniatric Society), founded in 1873, conveyed the orientation of the discipline. The term ‘phreniatry’ included both mind and brain illness and was considered more appropriate than ‘psychiatry’ for a discipline that intended to study mental diseases as brain diseases. Livi, who played a significant role in the development of Italian psychiatry, was an admirer of the German psychiatrist Wilhem Griesinger (1817–1868) and a staunch supporter of the experimental method. He set out to reform psychiatric training and research by establishing clinical teaching of psychiatry of the University of Modena on the premises of the San Lazzaro mental hospital in Reggio Emilia.<sup>14</sup> Together with his assistants Augusto Tamburini<sup>15</sup> (1848–1919) and Enrico Morselli, he co-founded a new psychiatric journal, the *Rivista sperimentale di freniatria e di medicina legale* (Journal of experimental phreniatry and

<sup>7</sup> Vucinich (1989, p. 170).

<sup>8</sup> Brömer (2008, p. 380) and Frascani (2002, pp. 151–152).

<sup>9</sup> Morselli (1910, p. 347).

<sup>10</sup> Morselli (1876).

<sup>11</sup> Morselli (1910, pp. 359–360).

<sup>12</sup> Guarnieri (1991, p. 290) and Donnelly (1992, pp. 25–36).

<sup>13</sup> Pick (1993, p. 116).

<sup>14</sup> Tamburini (1880a), p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> For an intellectual biography of Tamburini, see Babini (2002).

<sup>4</sup> Noakes (2008, p. 1) and Wolfram (2012, pp. 61–62).

<sup>5</sup> Monroe (2008, p. 218).

<sup>6</sup> Morselli (1894, pp. 6–7).

legal medicine). In 1892 this journal became the flagship journal of the Italian Phreniatric Society.

In 1877, Morselli was appointed director of the Santa Croce asylum in the Southern town of Macerata and three years later he was appointed professor of Nervous and Mental Diseases at the University of Turin, as well as director of the local mental hospital. While he continued his collaboration with the *Rivista sperimentale di freniatria* (directed by Tamburini since 1877), Morselli also founded and edited the *Rivista di Filosofia Scientifica* (Journal of Scientific Philosophy) in Turin. During the decade 1881–1891, his was the most authoritative journal of Italian positivism.<sup>16</sup> The two journals played a major role in widening the scope of Italian psychiatry beyond psychopathology, neuropathology and forensic medicine, to also include anthropology and physiological psychology (which became an independent discipline in 1904).

Within academic and intellectual circles that were increasingly permeated by positivist and evolutionary thought, spiritistic beliefs and practices were, not surprisingly, seen as a sign of mental disorder, as relics of ancient superstitions or as a sign of cultural backwardness among the Italian population.<sup>17</sup> In 1908, recalling what he called the “dominant anti-spiritism”<sup>18</sup> of Italian medicine in those years, Morselli wrote: “...I had the impression that both mediums and spiritists were sick people. As a psychiatrist and neurologist, I pitied them, as an anthropologist, considered them descent from the savages...”<sup>19</sup>

### 3. Psychiatry, psychology, hypnosis and the marvellous

In his speech at the Eighth Congress of the Italian Phreniatric Society in 1893, Augusto Tamburini emphasized that Italian psychiatry had established itself not only as a science of clinical observation, but also as an experimental discipline that included neurology, neurophysiology and psychology.<sup>20</sup> Rhetoric aside, Tamburini spoke with knowledge of the facts: a major impulse to these developments came from the “School of Reggio” i.e., from the San Lazzaro mental hospital which was under his direction since 1877.<sup>21</sup>

In the 1870s, the experimental work of the German physicians Gustav Fritsch and Eduard Hitzig and the Scottish neurologist David Ferrier produced a transnational intensification of studies on cerebral localization.<sup>22</sup> In the wake of this body of work, Tamburini, Giuseppe Seppilli (1851–1939) and the physiologist Luigi Luciani (1840–1918) conducted a series of experimental studies at the San Lazzaro mental hospital on cortical motor and psycho-sensory functions.<sup>23</sup> Other localization studies were conducted at the University of Naples by the psychiatrist Leonardo Bianchi (1848–1927).<sup>24</sup>

Leaving aside the controversies concerning localization theories and interpretations of experimental results, the idea that within the cortex there were centres or areas that directed the different mental functions enabled psychiatrists to relate mental symptoms and behaviour to disorders of the brain. Furthermore, localization studies provided them with an emerging model of brain functioning that had a deep influence on psychiatric thinking of those years.

At the end of the 1870s, psychiatrists—notably Morselli, Tamburini, Leonardo Bianchi, Seppilli, and Gabriele Buccola (1854–1885)—were the professional group most actively involved in the project of establishing experimental psychology in Italy.<sup>25</sup> In 1879, in the introductory chapter of his statistical study of suicide, Morselli emphatically argued that psychology had to disengage itself from speculative philosophy and be established on scientific basis. Drawing on the work of Gustav Fechner, Hermann von Helmholtz, Wilhem Wundt and Herbert Spencer he argued that there was no essential physiological difference between cerebral activity (thought and consciousness) and nervous activity (muscular contraction or a reflex action). Psychic phenomena corresponded to a modification of the material conditions in the brain cells and had to be studied with the physiological method. Psychology could thus be defined as the scientific study of physical and chemical transformations of energy in the brain. As any other physical process, he emphasized, psychophysical processes followed the law of conservation of energy.<sup>26</sup>

Both Tamburini and Morselli considered experimental psychology an essential part of the emerging scientific psychiatry and supported experimental psychology in their respective institutions. Tamburini established a psychological laboratory at the San Lazzaro where, between 1879 and 1881, the evolutionist positivist physician Buccola started his psychometric experiments on reaction time in healthy and ill people which he continued at the University of Turin as Morselli's assistant. Buccola's ‘unorthodox’ application of the Wundtian experimental method followed the postulate of continuity between physiological and pathological phenomena by the French physiologist Claude Bernard (1813–1878), who maintained that pathology was a quantifiable variation of a normal state. According to this assumption, which was widespread among Italian psychiatrists, mental disorders were variations of normal mental functions that could be apprehended by the study of individuals in normal and pathological conditions.<sup>27</sup>

In the 1880s, the French debate fostered medical interest in hypnosis, a phenomenon that seemed to provide ideal experimental conditions for the study of psychological and neuropathological phenomena. Drawing on Charcot's assumptions that hypnotic susceptibility was a nervous disturbance associated with hysteria, Tamburini and Seppilli conducted two experimental studies on the psychophysiology of hypnosis in hysterical women.<sup>28</sup> Hysteria was understood as a condition that depended on a presumed chemical-molecular modification or irritation of the nervous apparatus. It was assumed that while hysteria did not affect reason, it resulted in a morbid mental and moral disposition, hyper-excitability to physical and mental stimuli, and an inability to control instinctual drives. Tamburini's and Seppilli's experimental studies confirmed the presumed organic aetiology of hysteria. They stated that the physiological alterations produced by hypnosis in hysterical patients were due to an increased state of excitement in their nervous system.

They noted that some patients displayed behaviour similar to those of alleged ‘marvellous’ manifestations of magnetic somnambulists (clairvoyance, premonition, etc.). Tamburini, who maintained that somnambulistic feats were conscious simulation, was surprised to see that the same phenomena occurred in patients who were supposedly in a state of unconsciousness. As he wrote a decade later, this observation led him to understand both magnetic and hysterical ‘marvellous’ phenomena as an unconscious

<sup>16</sup> Marhaba (2003, p. 59).

<sup>17</sup> On the reception and diffusion of spiritism in Italy, see Biondi (1988).

<sup>18</sup> In this article I use the terms ‘spiritism’ and ‘spiritist’ rather than ‘spiritualism’ and ‘spiritualist’ because these are the terms used by Morselli.

<sup>19</sup> Morselli (1908, vol. I, p. 10).

<sup>20</sup> Zanchin & Salomone (2011, p. 26).

<sup>21</sup> Zanchin & Salomone (2011, pp. 20–26).

<sup>22</sup> On the experimental study by Fritsch and Hitzig, see Gross (2007).

<sup>23</sup> Luciani & Tamburini (1878, 1879), Luciani & Seppilli (1885) and Morabito (2000).

<sup>24</sup> Zanchin & Salomone (2011, p. 26).

<sup>25</sup> Cimino & Dazzi (2012, p. 315) and Bongiorno (2006).

<sup>26</sup> Morselli (1879, pp. 6–11). On the effects of the development of thermodynamics on psychological thought, see Shamdasani (2003, p. 202).

<sup>27</sup> Cimino & Dazzi (2012, p. 315). On Buccola, see Degni, Foschi, & Lombardo (2007).

<sup>28</sup> Tamburini & Seppilli (1882).

hysterical tendency to simulation.<sup>29</sup> From this perspective, the occurrences associated with the marvellous could be directly or indirectly explained in terms of neuropathology.

In 1886, however, the Italian debate around hypnosis, which had been until then confined to clinical and experimental settings, received a major impulse by the performances of the Belgian magnetizer Donato (Alfred Edouard D'Hont) in Turin and Milan. Donato used a self-devised hypnotic technique, which 'fascinated' healthy young men from his audience and seemed to turn them into automatons over whom he exercised absolute power.<sup>30</sup> Although he did not claim to possess any supernatural ability, his performances caused something of a public sensation and encouraged conjectures about his magnetic fluid and occult powers.

Morselli, who was a believer in the social function of science, discussed the 'magnetic question' in *Il Magnetismo animale, la fascinazione e gli stati ipnotici* (Animal magnetism, fascination and hypnotic states, 1886), a book written for the general public.<sup>31</sup> He explained that the mysterious effects produced by the magnetizer upon his subjects could, in fact, be explained by specific psychophysiological processes which were no different from other biological processes.<sup>32</sup> Hypnosis was caused by suggestion, a normal psychological phenomenon which, in individuals provided with hypnotic susceptibility, induced temporary physiological alterations. Although susceptibility presented variations from one individual to the other, it was a very common condition and was not a prerogative of ill or hysterical subjects. Thus it was not that surprising that Donato could easily hypnotize young, healthy men during his performances. "Healthy and robust individuals," he wrote, might even be "...more susceptible to magnetic influence than fragile and nervous people".<sup>33</sup> Female hysteria, however, was a condition that entailed the strongest susceptibility to hypnosis. This explained extreme and apparently mysterious hypnotic manifestations in hysterical subjects. As he wrote, "hysteria in all its varied forms" was "... an inexhaustible source of marvellous in all ages, probably because of the constitutional fragility of the nervous system in hysterical women".<sup>34</sup>

In order to eliminate all possible popular misconceptions concerning alleged magnetic fluids emanating from magnetizers, Morselli repeatedly insisted on the essential similarity of hypnotic and magnetic processes. The variations in magnetic and hypnotic phenomenology, he pointed out, depended on the specific technique used by the hypnotizer and on the suggestibility of the subject, as well as on the conditions under which the process took place.<sup>35</sup> The physiological process that underpinned these phenomena, he explained, was "a more or less deep artificial sleep in which some brain centres...[were] as paralyzed, while others...[were] extraordinarily excited".<sup>36</sup> During hypnosis psychic activity was reduced to 'automatism', (i.e., the absence of spontaneity), and 'suggestion', (i.e., the capacity of receiving and elaborating only certain external stimuli). This particular psychic state accounted for all marvellous and bizarre manifestations witnessed during Donato's performances, as well as for other phenomena ascribed to magnetism.<sup>37</sup> If in the "psychology of magnetism", there were "... many extraordinary, unusual, unexpected and obscure phenomena", none of them

was ever of "extra-biological and therefore of extra scientific nature".<sup>38</sup> In conclusion, the experimental study of hypnosis "clipped the wings of marvellous and supernatural phenomena".<sup>39</sup>

Morselli's study was influential theoretically in steering the debate away from Charcotian influences and asserting that hypnosis was produced by a psychological process.<sup>40</sup> It was, however, harshly criticized by prominent colleagues for presenting the magnetizer Donato in a positive light. If the technical ability of famous hypnotizers like Donato often impressed and even inspired medical experts, they also earned hostility from medical professionals who saw them as a challenge to medical authority.<sup>41</sup> As Lombroso put it, the indiscriminate practice of hypnosis by vulgar but skilled magnetizers like Donato, might produce hypnotic epidemics and incalculable psychological damage among the population.<sup>42</sup> Similar arguments were put forward by other psychiatrists and physiologists, who unanimously condemned Donato's stage hypnotism.<sup>43</sup>

Lombroso's defence of hypnosis as an exclusively medical technique was accompanied by a critical stance towards his colleagues, who, in his opinion, showed an unjustified scepticism towards his observations on the 'transposition of the senses', a phenomenon described by eighteenth century magnetizers.<sup>44</sup> Lombroso asserted that the transposition of the senses was a rare but genuine occurrence that he had observed with his own eyes in a hysterical and hypnotized patient. In his view, this phenomenon had a perfectly rational physiological explanation. In hysterical and hypnotized subjects, the powerful stimulation of the cortical sensory centres, owing to the paralysis of the others, might give rise to a physiological condition in which the senses were 'transposed' to other parts of the body.<sup>45</sup>

During his studies on hypnosis,<sup>46</sup> Lombroso grew increasingly critical of the 'conservative' attitude of the Italian academic medical elite and broadened his interests in various directions ranging from homeopathic medicine and metallo-therapy, French studies on the hypnotic phenomena of 'transfer' and 'polarization'<sup>47</sup> and mental suggestion.<sup>48</sup> He argued that the history of hypnosis demonstrated how excessively distrustful medical professionals were towards empiric observations and therapeutic remedies which challenged orthodox academic knowledge. In his view, the strict application of the experimental method in psychiatric research led to an unreasonable rejection of effective remedies of traditional medicine and to disregard of emerging research on mental suggestion.<sup>49</sup> The study of the functions of the nervous system, as he pointed out, was still in its infancy; to deny credibility to empirical observations and new ideas because they had not yet been corroborated by experimental physiological studies was, in his view, simply academic pedantry.<sup>50</sup>

In 1891, Lombroso accepted an invitation to study the medium Eusapia Palladino. He wrote that his own colleagues' scepticism

<sup>29</sup> Tamburini (1892a, p. 419).

<sup>30</sup> Gallini (2013, pp. 215–216).

<sup>31</sup> Morselli (1886, pp. 1–6).

<sup>32</sup> Morselli (1886, pp. 2–3).

<sup>33</sup> Morselli (1886, p. 35).

<sup>34</sup> Morselli (1886, p. 36).

<sup>35</sup> Morselli (1886, p. 52) and Richet (1880).

<sup>36</sup> Morselli (1886, pp. 30–32), quotation from p. 30.

<sup>37</sup> Morselli (1886, p. 92).

<sup>38</sup> Morselli (1886, pp. 91–92).

<sup>39</sup> Morselli (1886, p. 92).

<sup>40</sup> Gauld (1995, p. 339).

<sup>41</sup> Gauld (1995, p. 113).

<sup>42</sup> Lombroso (1886a, pp. 257–281).

<sup>43</sup> Gallini (2013, p. 252).

<sup>44</sup> On the origin of the theory of the transposition of senses, see Binet & Féré (1889, p. 31).

<sup>45</sup> Lombroso (1882, pp. 221–237).

<sup>46</sup> Lombroso (1886a, 1886b), Lombroso in Belfiore (1888) and Lombroso & Ottolenghi (1889).

<sup>47</sup> Binet & Féré (1885a, 1885b).

<sup>48</sup> Richet (1884).

<sup>49</sup> Lombroso (1888, p. 13).

<sup>50</sup> Lombroso (1888, pp. 3–6).



toward the transposition of the senses had, in turn, led him to question whether his own scepticism towards mediumistic phenomena was justified.<sup>51</sup> Together with Lombroso, Tamburini, Leonardo Bianchi and two other prominent psychiatrists took part in studying the medium. After observing the “singular phenomena” produced by the medium, Lombroso became convinced they were genuine and advanced a theory that explained them in neuropathologic terms.<sup>52</sup> Drawing on his theory of the transposition of the senses, he argued that in mediums (who in his view were the neuropaths *par excellence*), the powerful stimulation of certain centres was transformed into luminous or motive force. The medium’s cortical (or cerebral) force, transmitted to the surrounding matter via ether,<sup>53</sup> could thus produce phenomena such as levitation, the displacement of objects, and other occurrences observed in her séances.<sup>54</sup>

#### 4. Psychiatry, psychology and psychical research

In 1892 in his article on ‘Spiritism and Telepathy’, Tamburini noted that a new trend had emerged in science and philosophy. Human knowledge, he wrote, moved back and forth “between two apparently opposed tendencies, shifting the focus from the material to the dynamic side of life, from matter to energy”.<sup>55</sup> Here, Tamburini referred to the growing influence of the ‘dynamic view’ (i.e., energy-based hypothesis) to explain biological phenomena and their neo-vitalist and metaphysical implications. He considered this counter-movement to the dominant theoretical orientation an all too human reaction to the pessimistic view of human life conveyed by materialism and naturalism. One manifestation of this new trend, he argued, was the keen interest eminent scientists and intellectuals showed in investigating questions that were “previously the domain of mystics or charlatans”.<sup>56</sup> Nonetheless, notable experimental studies on spiritism and telepathy conducted abroad were scientifically serious and worthy of being reviewed in the *Rivista Sperimentale di Freniatria*, Tamburini suggested, particularly given the paucity of Italian studies in the field. Like animal magnetism, spiritistic manifestations related directly to the physiology and pathology of the nervous system. Therefore, such phenomena had to be “removed from the hands of charlatans and fanatics and made the object of scientific study”.<sup>57</sup> In reviewing recent publications by French psychologists Pierre Janet and Alfred Binet, Tamburini explained that mediums who claimed to transmit messages from the beyond suffered from personality disaggregation or personality division.<sup>58</sup> Rather than manifestations of the marvellous and inexplicable, their messages were in fact produced by individuals in the throes of hysteria and unconscious psychological automatism.<sup>59</sup>

However, it was considerably more difficult to explain manifestations of physical mediumship in physiological and pathological terms, given the lack of reliable research. This meant that speculations about their authenticity were not feasible. Distancing himself from Lombroso, Tamburini emphasized that when he had witnessed the phenomena produced by Palladino, he had remained sceptical about their authenticity, since they occurred under

conditions that did not constitute “absolute and irrefutable scientific demonstration...free from deception”.<sup>60</sup> Diplomatically, he criticized Lombroso’s assertions by commenting on his eminent colleague’s impulsive nature, implying the latter had cast caution and scientific detachment to the wind and this had led him—Lombroso—to contravene standards of experimental research. In subsequent and carefully controlled sittings, Tamburini witnessed that Eusapia produced no remarkable phenomenon, and had even been caught in the attempt to free one hand from the controls. He conceded that some phenomena which occurred in the séances with Lombroso “could not be easily explained either by fraud or by other natural hypotheses”. He concluded, however, that given the tendency of mediums to deceive, it was difficult to establish which phenomena were genuine and which were trickery or deception.<sup>61</sup>

Despite fundamental disagreement with Lombroso, Tamburini praised his hypothesis about nervous force as explanation for physical mediumism. He found that Lombroso’s theory held the merit of granting a proper accent to the neuropathological constitution of mediums and tried to explain the production of cerebral force with reference to pathological processes (irritation of cortical centres and discharge of energy) which were well-established in psychiatry. Furthermore, Lombroso’s theory provided a powerful argument against dangerous spiritistic beliefs that—Tamburini noted with concern—even tempted a few positivist intellectuals who failed to realise that spiritism was an atavistic tendency to “primitive forms of thought”, a rejection of centuries of scientific achievements that had painstakingly replaced irrational beliefs in “angels, demons, and spirits of the dead” with rational explanations in terms of “natural laws and principles”.<sup>62</sup>

Tamburini’s repeated claims on the exclusive psychiatric and psychological nature of spiritistic phenomena more than an actual interest in the study of mediumistic phenomena were a statement of principles aimed to counteract competing claims by the physicists Finzi and Ermacora. The latter had criticized Lombroso’s interpretation of phenomena of physical mediumism arguing that it was a hasty and unreasonable ‘medical appropriation’ of mechanical, physical, and chemical processes that occurred out of the medium’s body and thus had little to do with specialists of the human brain and its diseases.<sup>63</sup> During the 1890s, however, Italian psychiatrists hardly demonstrated any interest in the study of mediumism. As Tamburini rather explicitly argued in his article, studying mediums implied to open oneself up to deception and fraud, a situation which entailed considerable risk to one’s reputation and scientific seriousness. As a result, apart from Lombroso, no other prominent Italian psychiatrist engaged in psychical research during these years.

Nonetheless, given Lombroso’s international renown, his articles on the Palladino phenomenon soon started to attract the attention of psychical researchers and positivist scholars abroad.<sup>64</sup> In 1892, a series of experimental sittings with the medium was organized in Milan by a group of scientists and scholars (the ‘Milan Commission’), which included the French physiologist Charles Richet, the German philosopher Carl du Prel, the Russian councillor of state and scholar of spiritism Alexander Aksakov, the Italian astronomer Giovanni Schiapparelli, and Lombroso himself. Other participants included philosopher Angelo Brofferio who had abandoned positivism to embrace German and English idealism as

<sup>51</sup> Lombroso, C. (1892).

<sup>52</sup> Lombroso (1892, p. 9).

<sup>53</sup> On the concept of ether, see Noakes (2005).

<sup>54</sup> Noakes (2005, p. 9).

<sup>55</sup> Tamburini (1892a, p. 411).

<sup>56</sup> The term ‘mystic’ was an explicit reference to a French article that defined psychical research as a form of modern mysticism, see Rosenbach (1892).

<sup>57</sup> Rosenbach (1892, p. 411).

<sup>58</sup> Janet (1892) and Binet (1892).

<sup>59</sup> Tamburini (1892a, pp. 415–416).

<sup>60</sup> Tamburini (1892a, pp. 417–418).

<sup>61</sup> Tamburini (1892a, p. 419).

<sup>62</sup> Tamburini (1892a), p. 421.

<sup>63</sup> Ermacora (1892, p. 17).

<sup>64</sup> Biondi (1988, p. 140) and Alvarado (1993, p. 272).

well as spiritistic beliefs,<sup>65</sup> and professor of physics Giuseppe Gerona, as well as two other physicists, Giovanni Battista Ermacora and Giorgio Finzi, who a few years later founded the *Rivista di Studi Psicici* (Journal of Psychic Studies). This was to become the first Italian journal of psychical research modelled after the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, founded in London in 1882.<sup>66</sup>

The report of the Milan Commission described levitations of a table, materializations of hands, and other uncanny phenomena observed while the medium was strictly controlled and concluded that the observed phenomena were worth of further serious scientific attention.<sup>67</sup> Richet, as the only one who had cautiously refused to sign the report, argued that the phenomena seemed genuine, but suggested that further investigation was needed to reach conclusive proof that this was so.<sup>68</sup> Whilst the prominent scientific profile of many of its members gave a resounding transnational echo to the Commission's report, Tamburini promptly reiterated his doubts about the how genuine were the phenomena observed in Eusapia's case, thus expressing his scepticism towards the Commission's work. Table levitations and telekinesis, he asserted, could be easily explained by unconscious or conscious muscular movements by Palladino. As to the materializations, he maintained that the only plausible hypothesis was that the medium had the ability to induce visual and tactile hallucinations among the sitters. While he found the idea of materialization scientifically unacceptable, he maintained that veridical and telepathic hallucinations were convincingly demonstrated by the two-volume work *Phantasms of the Living* by Edmund Gurney, Frederic Myers, and Frank Podmore, published in 1886.<sup>69</sup> Drawing on his theory of hallucinations, Tamburini implied that the irritation of cortical sensory centres might be provoked by telepathic stimuli sent by the medium.<sup>70</sup>

Tamburini's interpretation of the phenomena described in the Milan Commission's report reasserted the regulatory claims of psychiatry over spiritistic phenomena. Furthermore, he emphasized that by attracting unwarranted public attention for mediumistic phenomena, events such as the Milan séances revived old superstitions that were "latent in everybody".<sup>71</sup>

In the mid-1890s, the debate on the crisis of positivism that spilled over from France into Italy, coalesced around the concerns for the emergence of philosophical and scientific orientations such as neo-idealism, neo-vitalism, teleological evolutionism, and pandynamism that challenged materialist and positivist assumptions.<sup>72</sup> In the context of these broader philosophical and scientific debates, Morselli argued that the study of spiritistic phenomena was part of an emerging mystical trend that was looming in all scientific fields.<sup>73</sup>

During the 1890s, the study of the so-called spiritistic phenomena was stimulated by the translation in French of *Phantasms of the Living* by the British Society for Psychical Research and by French psychologists engaged in psychical research, which represented 'spiritistic' ('supernormal') occurrences as complex phenomena worthy of careful scientific inquiry. In his article on telepathy and spiritism, Tamburini positively reviewed the French

translation of *Phantasms of the Living* and mentioned ongoing research of the Commission of the Society for Psychical Research on telepathic and veridical hallucinations. He invited the readers of the *Rivista Sperimentale di Freniatria* to send their own experiences of telepathic and veridical hallucinations to the journal for publication.<sup>74</sup> In 1895, as mentioned earlier, the physicists Ermacora and Finzi founded the *Rivista di Studi Psicici*, and, in 1896, Lombroso inserted a section on mediumistic and telepathic phenomena in the *Archivio di Psichiatria, di Antropologia Criminale e di Scienze penali* (Archive of Psychiatry, Anthropology and Penal Sciences), a prominent inter-disciplinary psychiatric journal founded and edited by Lombroso since 1880, and counting Morselli among its many distinguished contributors and collaborators.

Morselli's 'Critical notes on neo-mysticism in psychology', engaged in boundary-work by attacking the scientific legitimacy of the Society of Psychical Research and its French and Italian emulators, thus challenging the inclusion of psychical research as a branch of the 'new psychology'.<sup>75</sup> Morselli stated that psychical research introduced a congeries of unproven "psychic phenomena" into psychology, threatening the scientific status of the discipline. Even the most carefully studied among these phenomena, i.e., telepathy, premonition and veridical hallucinations, Morselli argued, were based simply on human testimony, a form of evidence of questionable value and accuracy. Such studies, he affirmed, did not comply with the scientific standards required by the positive method.<sup>76</sup> The supposed phenomena of telepathy and veridical hallucinations reported by *Phantasms of the living* and by psychical journals such as the *Annales de Sciences Psychiques* (Annals of Psychic Sciences), the *Rivista di Studi Psicici*, and the *Archivio di Psichiatria*, among others, could thus more plausibly be interpreted in Morselli's view, as simple coincidences, as memory illusions or as phenomena of a psychological and neuropathologic nature.

Furthermore, given the expectations raised by the discoveries of Röntgen rays, in 1895, even some scientists started to confer credibility to supernormal phenomena; scientific discoveries could thus aid the emergence of old animistic beliefs as well as of modern pseudo-scientific forms of mysticism.<sup>77</sup>

Despite his critical stance, Morselli found the interpretation of supernormal phenomena as manifestation of a yet-undiscovered psychic or nervous force by William Crookes, Lombroso and Richet not contrary to the positivist doctrine. It was not incompatible with the physio-psychological dynamics hypothesized for explaining hypnotic phenomena and in the light of recent discoveries in physics on the energetic properties of matter the concept of a nervous force "projected out of its generating device, the brain" became plausible. Morselli coined the term 'esopsychism' to describe the faculty of psychic forces to operate outside the brain. Esopsychism represented "a still obscure and poorly understood faculty of our psychic activity" it indicated the ability of psychic forces to "operate outside the brain and take the shape of non-corporeal beings, yet visible, audible and tangible 'ghosts'".<sup>78</sup> If confirmed by experimental proofs, he stated, this hypothesis would fully correspond to his philosophical and scientific stance, as it assimilated psychic phenomena into other natural forces or forms of energy. Morselli, however, argued that psychic phenomena were still unproven and thus the theory of psychic force was an unnecessary and "unprofitable mental effort".<sup>79</sup> Science did not need

<sup>65</sup> Brofferio (1892).

<sup>66</sup> On the history of the Society for Psychical Research, see Sommer (2013, pp. 59–78) and Monroe (2008, pp. 206–208).

<sup>67</sup> Aksakof et al. (1893).

<sup>68</sup> Richet quoted in Carrington (1909, p. 33). For a discussion on Richet's position, see Sommer (2013, p. 267).

<sup>69</sup> Gurney, Myers, & Podmore (1886).

<sup>70</sup> Tamburini (1892a, pp. 423–434).

<sup>71</sup> Tamburini (1892b, pp. 718–729), quotation from p. 720.

<sup>72</sup> On the debate in France, see Paul (1968, pp. 299–327).

<sup>73</sup> On the debate in Italy, see Mosso (1895) and Morselli (1895).

<sup>74</sup> Tamburini (1892a, pp. 423–434).

<sup>75</sup> On the concept of boundary-work, see Gieryn (1983).

<sup>76</sup> Morselli (1897, p. 15).

<sup>77</sup> Morselli (1897, pp. 46–47, 51).

<sup>78</sup> Morselli (1897, p. 49).

<sup>79</sup> Morselli (1897, p. 54).

“pseudo-scientific” hypotheses in order to debunk the alleged ‘marvellous happenings’. Most of the allegedly extraordinary phenomena could be already explained by physiopsychology and it was logical to assume that the discipline would soon be able to explain them all. The study of supernormal phenomena had to be conducted with the inductive method, until science “positively and experimentally demonstrated in laboratories and clinics” the existence of homogeneous collections of facts and phenomena that “like physical, chemical, biological phenomena had “constant properties and invariable determinism, that is, that they [were] subjected to laws”.<sup>80</sup>

Morselli’s defence of the experimental-positivist method and his criticism of psychical research, however, assumed a more nuanced meaning and a greater relevance when related to his discussion of the theoretical impasse of psychology in his *Manuale di semeiotica delle malattie mentali* (Textbook of semiotics of mental illness) published in 1884. In the *Manuale*, Morselli stated that while he supported psycho-physical parallelism, he had become critical of the naturalistic assumption that psychical phenomena (i.e., sensation, consciousness and memory) were purely the result of brain activity that could be explained by the principles of conservation of energy. He noted:

[t]here is no doubt that consciousness depends on physical conditions, which in part are well known (biological determinism of the psychic fact). The knowledge of these conditions, however, does not contain the solution of the problem, because they are the physiological antecedents, concomitants and consequents of every psychic phenomenon, but they are not at all the ‘psychic phenomenon itself’.<sup>81</sup>

He stated that materialist and spiritualist approaches only provided hypothetical and metaphysical answers and were thus unable to provide a scientific explanation to this problem. In his view, the only way to maintain a unitary interpretation of psychic phenomena and reconcile the body-mind antinomy was provided by “contemporary monism” that saw matter as “a form of universal energy”.<sup>82</sup> From this perspective, sensation, i.e., the consciousness of modifications that preceded or accompanied the functional work of organs, was the basic element of a group of psychic phenomena that had their own special modalities, laws, and evolution. These phenomena, he argued, were distinct from the elementary physico-chemical phenomena of inorganic matter and from the complex vital physico-chemical phenomena of organized matter.<sup>83</sup>

Morselli maintained that psychology should continue to be based upon the experimental method and implied that his assimilation of psychic phenomena to manifestations of energy supplemented and did not undermine his positivist approach. However his adherence to dynamic monism and acknowledgement of the hypothesis of psychic force indicated a change in his conceptual framework and a pragmatic exploration of the energetic and neo-vitalist theories that were emerging in those years.<sup>84</sup> From this perspective, his subsequent study of phenomena of physical mediumism appears closely connected to his effort to gain a more comprehensive understanding of psychological phenomena generally.

The theoretical transition that underpinned the transformation of the so-called spiritistic phenomena into an area of studies that could further the understanding of psychological and physiological

phenomena was clearly articulated by the positivist physiologist Luigi Luciani. In the introduction to the third edition of his *Fisiologia dell'uomo* (Human Physiology, 1908), he stated that the adoption of the experimental method of physico-chemical sciences had undeniably led to great progress in physiology, but that psychological phenomena (sensibility and consciousness) would always remain impenetrable to mechanistic explanations. The dynamic finality of living beings appeared “irreducible to a simple play of physical and chemical energies”, and “irreconcilable with the iron necessity of mechanical laws”. The atomistic and energetic hypotheses based on materialism and vitalist or psychical force hypotheses based on neo-vitalism were thus “... presumptions necessary to future discoveries and to the progress of science in general”.<sup>85</sup>

Luciani suggested that physiologists and psychologists should not reject the study of ‘strange’ and ‘abnormal’ phenomena observed in psychiatry, experimental hypnosis, and psychical research with the futile argument that they could not be reconciled with the common postulates of physical and biological science. He wrote:

[t]aken as a whole these abnormal phenomena... are equivalent to vivisection experiments upon the human mind. As such they are valuable in psychological analysis, because normal phenomena, owing to mental exaltation or dissociation, assume undue proportions, which facilitates the study of the individual element or components of the human intellect.<sup>86</sup>

In the early 1900s, Luciani took part in experimental séances with the medium Eusapia Palladino and declared that her phenomena were genuine and natural occurrences.<sup>87</sup> In the same years, other Italian physiologists developed interest in Eusapia’s phenomena, namely Alberto Agazzotti (1877–1963), Carlo Foà (1880–1971) and Amedeo Herlitzka (1872–1949), all assistants of the physiologist Angelo Mosso (1846–1910) at the University of Turin, and Filippo Bottazzi (1867–1941) director of the Institute of Physiology at the University of Naples. In 1907, Mosso’s assistants published a report on their sittings with the medium in the Turin newspaper *La Stampa* in which they formulated the hypothesis that the medium’s phenomena might be produced by energy radiating from her body. In the same year, Bottazzi organized a series of experimental séances with Eusapia in the university’s physiological laboratory. He declared that the medium’s phenomena were unquestionably authentic and suggested that they were manifestations of a biological force. A report of the séances appeared in 1907 as an article in the *Rivista d'Italia*, and, subsequently, as a book.<sup>88</sup>

## 5. The psychology of spiritism

In 1901 Morselli took part in a series of experimental sittings with Eusapia Palladino organized by the Minerva Circle, an association for psychical research established in Genoa in 1898.<sup>89</sup> Initially sceptical, Morselli became increasingly convinced of the authenticity of Palladino’s phenomena and went on to study her in three subsequent series of experimental séances.<sup>90</sup>

As Andreas Sommer aptly puts it, Morselli’s investigation of mediumistic phenomena epitomized a novel epistemic approach

<sup>80</sup> Morselli (1897, p. 57).

<sup>81</sup> Morselli (1894, p. 7).

<sup>82</sup> Morselli (1894, p. 8).

<sup>83</sup> Morselli (1894).

<sup>84</sup> Morselli (1894, p. 10).

<sup>85</sup> Luciani (1911 [1908], vol. 1, pp. 5–7). English translation: F. A. Welby.

<sup>86</sup> Luciani (1917 [1908], vol. 4, pp. 455–456). English translation: F. A. Welby.

<sup>87</sup> On Luciani experiences with Eusapia Palladino, see Morselli (1908, vol. II, pp. 270–272).

<sup>88</sup> Bottazzi (2011).

<sup>89</sup> On the history of the Minerva circle, see Morselli (1908, vol. I, pp. 173–178).

<sup>90</sup> For a summary account of the séances in Genoa, see Carrington (1909, pp. 72–89).

that could be qualified as ‘anomalous-inductivist’.<sup>91</sup> Like Charles Richet and the Polish psychologist Julian Ochorowicz, Morselli saw mediumistic phenomena as scientific anomalies to be studied with the positive method and was not interested in transcendental implications of supernormal phenomena. In his work, Morselli systematically criticized the interpretations of mediumistic phenomena that supported the ‘spirit hypothesis’ and maintained that Eusapia’s performances were exclusively the product of her ‘bio-psychic dynamism’.

By the beginning of 1900s, the medium’s performances had already been the objects of a great deal of scholarly attention.<sup>92</sup> She was unquestionably the most famous and studied medium of her time. In his annotated “Paladinian bibliography”, Morselli included about two hundreds articles and books published in the period 1889–1907, a number authored by prominent European scholars such as Richet, Lombroso, the Polish psychologist Julian Ochorowicz, the Swiss psychologist Theodore Flournoy, the German psychiatrist Albert von Schrenck-Notzing, the British physicist Oliver Lodge, the French engineer Albert De Rochas, the French astronomer Camille Flammarion and the British philosopher Henry Sidgwick, president of the Society for Psychical Research.<sup>93</sup> Apart from the latter—whose article summarized the negative results of the Cambridge’s séances of 1895—<sup>94</sup> the other experimenters supported the authenticity of Eusapia’s phenomena.<sup>95</sup> Nonetheless Lombroso, Ochorowicz, and Richet, among others, noted that like many other mediums Eusapia had the tendency to cheat, especially when she did not manage to produce a phenomenon.<sup>96</sup> Morselli reached similar conclusions. He held that the medium consciously tried to deceive her audience when she did not manage to produce a phenomenon or following an all too human impulse to spare the expenditure of her energy.

The question of the psychogenesis of mediumistic faculty, or as he put it, the “intrinsic determinism” of mediumistic phenomena, was at the centre of Morselli’s psychological and physiological investigation.<sup>97</sup> Morselli subscribed the dominant medical theory that mediumship was mostly associated to hysteria, a physiological condition that accounted for spontaneous autosuggestion and personality disaggregation. As he wrote, Eusapia unquestionably suffered from hysteria, which enhanced her ability to use auto-suggestion to reach the trance, a condition in which a temporary obliteration of higher consciousness enabled a full expression of her ‘psychodynamic force’.<sup>98</sup>

The genealogy of the idea of a force projected by the nervous system had its roots in mesmerism and received a number of reformulations in the nineteenth century.<sup>99</sup> In his theory of ‘cerebral or cortical force’, for instance, Lombroso combined the concept of psychic force with contemporaneous theories of brain localization and alleged physiological dynamics that accounted for hallucinations, epilepsy, and hypnosis.<sup>100</sup>

In the last years of the nineteenth century discoveries such as the X-rays, electromagnetism, radioactivity in uranium salts and in polonium shaped a new scientific imagery. In this context, the idea

of nervous force projected by the human body appeared plausible to many researchers. As Morselli wrote:

I confess that I have always found the observations of Baraduc, Baréty ... and of the Baron Reichenbach implausible... particularly because these observers use hypnotized subjects and give weight to the comments of these people who claim to see their own animic fluid... However, if one thinks of it, the idea of radiations emanating from the human and animal body is not so far-fetched....especially after the discovery of ultraviolet rays, cathode rays, x- rays ... The lines of magnetic force and the Hertzian waves are they not admirably incomprehensible and yet apparent and active before our eyes?<sup>101</sup>

By the early 1890s, the alleged human radiations were already objects of experimental study. New instruments like the ‘sthenometer’ by the psychophysicist Paul Joire, the ‘biometer’ by the neurologist Hippolyte Baraduc, were devised to detect and measure these supposed human effluvia. The experiments with these instruments—in particular Joire’s sthenometer—seemed to demonstrate the existence of a force emanating from the nervous system.<sup>102</sup> Morselli referred to them as an instance of the new emerging field of ‘biological energetic’.<sup>103</sup>

Morselli suggested that Eusapia was able to exteriorize her bio-psychic dynamism to create transitory ‘teleplastic’ materializations. Even if audacious, he argued, this hypothesis did not contradict any cosmological, biological or psychological notion. Science recognized the existence of forces or centres and systems of forces in astronomy, physics, chemistry, and biology, thus it was not implausible that the existence of new forces might be recognized in “psychic and hyper-psychic facts”.<sup>104</sup>

From this perspective, the “spiritistic” hands, arms, or human-like forms that appeared during the sittings were materialized projections of images thought by the medium, which were only aimed at impressing her audience and had no intrinsic meanings. The different shapes of materialized ‘forms’, he argued, corresponded to images consciously thought by the medium.

Morselli suggested that also the materialized ‘spirits’ allegedly evoked by the medium were nothing else than materializations of impersonal body-like forms identified by all too willing sitters.<sup>105</sup> However, he also put forth an alternative explanation postulating that the medium could ‘read’ images and information in the mind of the sitters through her extra-sensory powers:

[s]uppose that mediums like Paladino have the faculty to shape their bio-psychic emanations or undulations projected from the centers of images through the radiant externalization of their forces (by formulating this hypothesis, I note that I do not fear any longer to fall into ancient mysticism). And suppose, as it seems the case nowadays, that telepathy and telesthesia are [scientifically] proven. Even without admitting the existence of the “disembodied” ... one can equally understand the possibility of teleplastic formation, of the transitory organization of identifiable entities.<sup>106</sup>

This hypothesis, he reflected, seemed absurd only because it went beyond what a positivist was prepared to admit, however it was not illogical or in contradiction with the natural laws. The problem, he argued, was the academic mental habit to reason within the limits of rigid syllogisms. In order to overcome it, he wrote:

<sup>91</sup> Sommer (2013, pp. 82, 126 note157).

<sup>92</sup> On the contribution of mediumistic performances on psychical research’s concepts, methods and public image, see Alvarado (1993).

<sup>93</sup> Morselli (1908, vol. I, pp. 134–170).

<sup>94</sup> Morselli (1908, pp. 145–146).

<sup>95</sup> On this point, see Richet (1923, p. 419, note 2).

<sup>96</sup> For the different interpretations of Eusapia’s tendency to cheat, see Ochorowicz (1896), Lombroso in Baudi di Vesme (1897, p. 265), Alvarado (1993), Sommer (2012a, p. 26), Sommer (2012b, p. 268).

<sup>97</sup> Morselli (1908, p. ix).

<sup>98</sup> Morselli (1908, pp. 124–132).

<sup>99</sup> For a discussion, see Alvarado (2006).

<sup>100</sup> For hallucinations and epilepsy theories, see Tamburini (1880b).

<sup>101</sup> Morselli (1908, vol. I, p. 262).

<sup>102</sup> Lachappelle (2011, pp. 54–55).

<sup>103</sup> Morselli (1908, vol. I, p.247).

<sup>104</sup> Morselli (1908, vol. II, pp. 173–174), quotation from p. 174.

<sup>105</sup> Morselli (1908, vol. I, pp. 447–448).

<sup>106</sup> Morselli (1908, vol. II, p. 449).



[w]e need to enlarge our ideas on the powers of our body and on the dynamics of external things: we have formed an overly narrow concept of nature. .... We must free ourselves from prejudice: the organized science ... has as many prejudices, and as many imperatives [that constrain] our logic, as dogmatic religions and rituals have. I'm glad to see that both in theory and in practice I am able to affirm such things. Surely, they reveal a change of ideas, but this proves to me that my brain is still malleable.<sup>107</sup>

Ultimately the different strands of his reflections—psychopathological and neuropathological as pre-requisite for mediumship, the hypothesis of a bio-psychic force, and metapsychical concepts such as subconscious automatism, telepathy and telesthesia—coalesced in his 'psychodynamic' theory of mediumistic phenomena.<sup>108</sup>

Mediumistic phenomena were the effects of a psychodynamism that was present in humans (and probably also in higher animals) but that required special conditions "not dissimilar to disease or extra-physiological anomaly" in order to manifest itself.<sup>109</sup>

In the last part of his study, faithful to his positivist method, Morselli presented a classificatory scheme in which he arranged and discussed the explanatory hypotheses on mediumistic phenomena according to their decreasing distance with positivist science. Theories supporting the hypothesis of a bio-psychical force were classified by him as 'pre-scientific', the closest category to orthodox science. While he maintained that the scientific study of supernormal phenomena was still at its beginning, he had a strong sense that the concept of psychic force might have significant implications for psychology.

## 6. Conclusion

By looking at the intellectual trajectory of the Italian psychiatrist Enrico Morselli from the 1870s to the early years of 1900s, this article has sought to shed light on the theoretical context that informed the understanding of spiritism among leading Italian psychiatrists in the period under consideration. In particular, the discussion has focused on the theoretical and disciplinary circumstances that underpinned the transformations in the understanding of alleged spiritistic phenomena through the changes in Morselli's theoretical stance towards the study of spiritistic occurrences. The epistemological assumptions that informed his academic training, his commitment in the modernization of Italian psychiatry, and the shifts in his theoretical framework illustrate the processes that reconfigured spiritistic phenomena from residual manifestations of evolutionary backwardness to intriguing scientific anomalies suitable for scientific research.

In the 1870s and the 1880s, in a psychiatric context pervaded by an ethos of scientific and social modernization along materialist, evolutionist and positivist lines, leading Italian psychiatrists considered 'spiritism' as a manifestation of mental pathology and a sign of an atavistic inclination in the population.

In the 1880s, the studies of brain anatomy and physiology, and the inclusion of experimental psychology as an integral part of psychiatry raised the hope to reach a comprehensive scientific understanding of normal and pathological brain functions. The model of brain functioning that emerged in those years informed an interpretation of the hypnotic process and subconscious psychic activity in terms of hypothetical neurophysiological dynamics. In this context, Morselli's psychophysiological explanation of apparently marvellous phenomena related to hypnosis and magnetism

was the first comprehensive psychiatric attempt to reconfigure marvellous phenomena as psychological manifestations and eradicate popular beliefs concerning magnetic fluids and magnetizers' occult powers through popular scientific education.

In the 1890s, with the emergence of philosophical and scientific trends that challenged materialist and naturalist orientations, the debate on the crisis of positivism, and the rising status of psychical research as a branch of Italian psychology, the study of the so-called spiritistic phenomena assumed different and more complex connotations. The realization that physiopsychology had reached a dead-end in the explanation of psychological phenomena and the growing influence of energetic and neo-vitalist theories in the understanding of biological and psychological phenomena led Morselli to reconceptualise psychological phenomena as manifestations of energy and to a pragmatic exploration of concepts that might provide a comprehensive understanding of them. In this theoretical transition Morselli, as well as the physiologists Luciani and Bottazzi envisioned psychical research as an emerging area of study that might have critical relevance for the comprehension of psychological and physiological processes. In a scientific context in which the idea of a yet-undiscovered nervous force radiating from the human body seemed to be supported by recent developments in physical research, Morselli and others saw the study of a medium famous for her powerful physical manifestations as a quasi-experimental possibility to observe this presumed force at work and identify the organic determinants implied in its production. The experimental séances with Eusapia persuaded Morselli that mediumistic phenomena could be explained as products of a 'psychodynamism' of unknown nature that was present in all humans, but could be exteriorized only by individuals that presented pathological conditions that were characteristics of mediumship.

Although Morselli's study of physical mediumism did not result in any relevant development of the concept of psychic force, it produced a significant change in his theoretical stance. In his short autobiography, written in February 1907, i.e., about a month after his last séance with Eusapia, he stated that since his youth positivist and evolutionist theories and monism had provided him with a "synthetic view on things" that satisfied both his intellectual and moral tendencies. He pointed out, however, that his intellectual position had not crystallized in a rigid faith, and that he was still receptive to "new and different truths, as long as they appear[ed] to be well substantiated".<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Morselli (1908, vol. II, p. 450).

<sup>108</sup> Morselli (1908 p. 552).

<sup>109</sup> Morselli (1908, pp. 554–555).

<sup>110</sup> Morselli (1910, pp. 354–356), quotations from p. 356.

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